

Seatbelt Survivor

In each issue of the First State Road Scholar we will highlight the story of a Delawarean who has been involved in a motor vehicle crash, and believes that he/she was saved from death or serious injury because they chose to wear a seatbelt.

Timothy Healy knows that he and his older brother Tom are lucky to be alive. On June 11, 2000, 18-year old Tom was driving Tim to work at 6 a.m., traveling eastbound on Sussex 404 toward Georgetown. Still tired, 16-year old Tim was trying to catch a few last zzzz's before they got there. But he woke up when he felt their Plymouth Voyager minivan start to drift.

Tim asked his brother what was wrong but Tom, who was intent on trying to make sure the minivan wouldn't hit a telephone pole, wouldn't answer. Although Tom tried to steer the Voyager onto a farm access road, he missed and the next thing they knew, the van hit a ditch. Tom started to scream and Tim heard a bang under the vehicle.

This is the last thing that Tim remembers. According to witnesses, the minivan went airborne, flipped a few times, hit the ground and flipped some more. The bench seat in the middle of the van was thrown out of the vehicle, either out of the side door or the back hatch, both of which were open when the van finally came to rest on its driver's side.

Tim says that the first witnesses on the scene thought the boys were dead for sure. But they found them both hanging there by their seatbelts, Tom conscious, and Tim briefly unconscious.

"Once I came to, I kept trying to talk to Tom. I wanted him to tell me everything would be all right," said Tim. "But he kept telling me to be quiet because he had an oxygen mask on and couldn't talk."

Tom needed oxygen because he had had an asthma attack, and was reaching for his inhaler. When his attention was diverted from the road, that's when the minivan started to drift.

"So I clutched my dad's Bible and his HSS Nimitz hat, which were about the only two things that stayed in the van," said Tim.

Rescue personnel came quickly and had to use "the jaws of life" to cut the boys out. They were then transported to a local hospital, where the teens were treated and released. Tim's only injuries were a stiff neck, a mild concussion, and bumps and bruises. When asked what his brother's injuries were, Tim jokes, "I think just his pride."

When he went to look at the wreckage of the van later that day, the younger Healy started to cry. "It finally all hit me then. The van was destroyed. The hood was bent, the engine was shoved into the passenger cabin, and the back hatch was open and bent up too. I just couldn't believe we had survived that."

But Tim instinctively knew why they had. "Even before the Paramedics told me it was our seatbelts that saved us, I knew. But they also told us that had we not been wearing them, I would have been thrown through the front windshield, over the hood, and Tom would've been thrown into the bent hood. And that we would've been killed instantly."

Since the crash, Tim and Tom have gone back to thank the Paramedics and firefighters who worked so quickly to get them out and to the hospital. Tim also made a video about the crash for a project that would earn him an Eagle Scout badge. He's also become an avid seatbelt advocate, handing out literature promoting the benefits of wearing them at health and safety fairs.

He says there's one message he would like everyone to hear loud and clear. "Wear your seatbelt because your life can change in a split second. It doesn't matter if you're just going down the street. Wear it."

We hear you, Tim.

For more stories of seatbelt survivors, log onto our highway safety website at www.state.de.us/highway.